

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL D. SNYDER, ACTING DEPUTY DIRECTOR,  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE  
THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE HOUSE  
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, ON SNOWMOBILE USE IN THE NATIONAL  
PARK SYSTEM.**

**April 12, 2005**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for holding this oversight hearing on snowmobile use in the National Park System.

Providing for the enjoyment of park resources and values is a fundamental purpose of the National Park Service's (Service) mission and of all units of the National Park System. From the time Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872, providing access to parks and the means to enjoy them have been a high priority for Congress and for park managers. The desire to provide access to park resources is the reason roads, accommodations, and recreational facilities have been built in national parks. It is also the reason that we continuously seek ways to improve the experience for all our visitors.

The National Park Service occupies a small, but significant niche in the spectrum of recreational lands available for public use. Our visitor use objective is to provide for recreational activities that enable visitors to experience the significant park resources and values for which the park was established; and to provide opportunities that are inspirational, educational, healthful and satisfying experiences in a way that conserves park resources unimpaired for future generations.

To that end, snowmobiles have been an integral part of the winter park experience since they first entered parks, beginning in the early 1960s. For example, when the annual number of visitors on snowmobiles was less than 1,000 at Yellowstone National Park in 1963, a visitor on a snowmobile was somewhat unusual. By 1966 that number had increased to over 5,000. During the mid-1960s there was great pressure from local communities for park managers to provide winter access into national parks, primarily by plowing roads. In 1967, the pressure for more access culminated with a Congressional hearing held in Jackson, Wyoming. At that hearing the National Park Service stated that transportation in the winter should be that which is most appropriate to the park.

Oversnow transport seemed to best meet that need considering scenic value and the limited snow plowing technology available at the time. In 1968, in response to the growing number of snowmobile enthusiasts, Yellowstone park administrators developed the first formal winter use policy. The policy not only permitted the use of oversnow vehicles, but also encouraged their use as the most appropriate method for enjoying the park in the winter.

Today, snowmobiling occurs in 43 of the 388 units of the National Park System in 21 different states with most of the snowmobile use occurring on existing roads or frozen water surfaces. Of these 43 parks, 22 receive less than 200 snowmobile visitors per year or limit use to a small area. Fourteen of the units allowing snowmobiling are in Alaska and are subject to the special access provisions of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act which authorizes this use for traditional and subsistence activities. Outside of Alaska, only a few park units receive substantial snowmobile use, with

numbers exceeding 15,000 vehicles per year. These units are Yellowstone National Park, Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, and Voyageurs National Park. Other than at Yellowstone and Grand Teton, which have been subject to several rulemakings and a series of litigation, snowmobile use data from the last five years indicate no significant change in numbers of snowmobiles entering parks, apart from the fluctuations that occur in any activity dependent on snowfall.

Since 2000, several parks have updated their special regulations regarding snowmobile use. For the most part, these regulations simply codified the existing use patterns that were already occurring in the park. The notable exception is Rocky Mountain National Park. The park's snowmobile regulations were amended in September of 2004 to eliminate three snowmobile routes within the park. Motorized access continues on roads as well as on the North Supply Access Trail, which is an important access route to the Arapaho Roosevelt National Forest and the community of Grand Lake, Colorado.

The laws and policies applicable to the management of the National Parks System afford the Service broad discretion and mandate no single method for satisfying our responsibility to protect park resources. The NPS is can use a variety of administrative tools including visitor education, increased enforcement, regulatory measures and use limits (numerical caps or those related to time-of day), to manage snowmobile use. Since 1999, the NPS has devoted substantial resources to the study of appropriate methods of managing snowmobiles in national parks, the majority of which have been focused on the ongoing administrative process in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. A

review of the management strategies implemented last winter in these parks has produced some very encouraging results.

The current winter use program at Yellowstone includes a variety of measures to protect park resources while allowing for appropriate visitor enjoyment and access to the park's treasures. In Yellowstone, these measures include requirements that all snowmobiles are "best available technology" (BAT) as determined by the Service to be the cleanest and quietest commercially available. The park limits the total number of snowmobiles that may enter each day to 720 and also requires that all snowmobilers travel with professional, commercial guides. Commercial guides are providing an outstanding educational experience for our visitors, explaining Yellowstone's natural and cultural resources at frequent stops during tours.

During the winter of 2004-2005, a total of 84,982 visitors entered Yellowstone National Park, including 24,049 on snowmobiles, 17,242 in snowcoaches, and 43,239 in private automobiles (through Yellowstone's North Entrance, which is open to wheeled vehicles year-around). During January and February, snowmobile visitation averaged 239 snowmobiles per day (out of 720 allowed), with a peak day of 424 snowmobiles (on February 23). During January and February, an average of 173 people also visited Yellowstone each day via snowcoach.

The current Winter Use Plan for Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks and the John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Memorial Parkway will be in effect for no more than a total of

three winter seasons (through the winter of 2006-2007). During this time, the NPS is preparing a long-term plan for winter use in these parks, which is expected to result in a permanent regulation. The Service is continuing to monitor this managed winter use program and will be using this information when evaluating the environmental impacts of each alternative studied for the long-term plan.

The lessons learned from the winter use planning process in Yellowstone and Grand Teton have resulted in a shift in the service-wide policy regarding the management of snowmobiles. The process has demonstrated that winter access to even the busiest park can be managed to provide for a variety of visitor experiences, while still protecting the visitors, the employees and the environment. The current system-wide snowmobile policy includes:

- Decisions regarding snowmobile use should be made on a park-by-park basis, relying on the professional judgment of park staff and allowing park staff to incorporate those management strategies best suited to the individual park unit. Given the many differences in among parks, it has become clear that a Service-wide directive to prohibit recreational snowmobile use is not warranted and that, with requirements for monitoring and increased use of newer technology, recreation uses can continue to be part of the NPS winter experience.
- Parks should consider utilizing new technologies, education and management strategies to mitigate any unacceptable adverse effects of snowmobiles. Since 1999, the NPS has continued to study how BAT requirements and adaptive management can mitigate the effects of snowmobiles in the parks.

- Lessons learned through adaptive management at Yellowstone and Grand Teton should continue to be reviewed for applicability elsewhere.
- The NPS can lead by example when purchasing and operating snowmobiles for administrative purposes. Only snowmobiles that meet BAT standards should be used by the NPS for administrative purposes unless the respective Regional Director approves a justification for an exception.

At this time, we believe that Executive Orders 11644 and 11989 issued by Presidents Nixon and Carter and the existing NPS regulations are adequate to protect park resources. The ongoing planning process at Yellowstone and Grand Teton and the recent regulatory changes on the Appalachian Trail and at Apostle Islands National Lakeshore and Rocky Mountain National Park adequately address the issues associated with snowmobiles in those parks. The NPS expects that other parks will consider the lessons learned from these parks as well as technological improvements and other new data as they continue to manage snowmobile use.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. I will be happy to answer any questions you might have.